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Sisterhood in the '60s: Joan, Peggy, and a Feminist Awakening

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Abstract

The period between World War II and the women's liberation movement was marked by palpable tension over social changes and gender ideology—an aspect of the postwar era well-known to historians but usually overlooked in the mass media. Television shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963), *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966) imagined a time that never existed, presenting the nation's women as domestic and suburban, happily embracing their roles as homemakers and submitting to their husband's authority (Coontz, 2000). This idyllic media memory, bequeathed to subsequent generations by reruns of these popular shows, has encouraged a tendency to view the feminist activism of the late 1960s and 1970s as a paradigmatic shift rather than a predictable development. But as historians and cultural critics have noted, social movements do not give birth to themselves (Douglas, 1995; Gitlin, 1987; Evans, 1980). This acknowledgment runs through *Mad Men*, giving the narrative a sophisticated complexity as it unpacks the antecedents of second-wave feminism.

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | History of Gender | Journalism Studies | Social History | United States History | Women's History

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Sisterhood in the '60s

Joan, Peggy, and a Feminist Awakening

Tracy Lucht

The period between World War II and the women's liberation movement was marked by palpable tension over social changes and gender ideology—an aspect of the postwar era well-known to historians but usually overlooked in the mass media. Television shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963), *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960), and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–1966) imagined a time that never existed, presenting the nation's women as domestic and suburban, happily embracing their roles as homemakers and submitting to their husband's authority (Coontz, 2000). This idyllic media memory, bequeathed to subsequent generations by reruns of these popular shows, has encouraged a tendency to view the feminist activism of the late 1960s and 1970s as a paradigmatic shift rather than a predictable development. But as historians and cultural critics have noted, social movements do not give birth to themselves (Douglas, 1995; Gitlin, 1987; Evans, 1980). This acknowledgment runs through *Mad Men*, giving the narrative a sophisticated complexity as it unpacks the antecedents of second-wave feminism.

As the 1960s dawned, American women were entering the workforce in large numbers, economic expectations were growing among the middle class, and activists were beginning to document the contrast between America's individualistic ideals and its gendered inequities (Meyerowitz, 1994). Against this backdrop, two discourses emerged to advocate women's empowerment and give voice to the vocational experiences of white middle-class women. These were the Cosmo Girl discourse, introduced in 1962 by Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* (Ouellette, 2010), and liberal feminism, galvanized in 1963 by Betty Friedan's *The*

Feminine Mystique. These influential texts have served as references for the writers of *Mad Men* and for scholars analyzing female characters in the series (Marcovitch & Batty, 2012). However, by 1970 a more radical feminist discourse had emerged, articulated in part by Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, which reached past the goal of institutional reform to challenge all of patriarchal culture. In this chapter, I argue that the women employed at *Mad Men*'s Sterling Cooper are best understood through the historical frame provided by these discourses—a form of analysis that requires shifting the focus from the individual characters themselves to the space between them. This critical-historical interpretation demonstrates the heuristic value of the series as a means of understanding 1960s gender ideology and the conditions that gave rise to the separatist discourse of women's liberation in the 1970s.

Mad Men presents a surprisingly nuanced picture of postwar history by destabilizing the myth of happy suburban domesticity and examining the intersecting realities of gender, socioeconomic class, and professional mobility for white Americans. This makes it different from most television series based on the past, which typically use nostalgia as a means of coping with—or escaping from—current social tensions (Dow, 1996). It also marks an evolutionary step forward in the exploration of feminist perspectives on television, which are rarely presented in the plural. Dark and provocative, *Mad Men*'s narrative examines and critiques hegemonic masculinity, white femininity, consumer culture, and the ideal of the patriarchal nuclear family. Yet, in another departure from the usual tropes of television drama, the series avoids portraying women as one-dimensional victims of their male chauvinist oppressors even as it reconstructs the era's ignominious sexism. Rather, the lead female roles are essential to the narrative, playing out multiple strains of discourse related to white women's status as workers within a culture that treated marriage and motherhood as their inevitable destiny.

The series imagines various ways women might have functioned within a patriarchal workplace, fighting for the limited power available to them. It also exposes the tension that can arise between women who have been socialized to compete with one another rather than with men. Advertising Hall of Fame member Laurel Cutler said of her own experiences during the period depicted on *Mad Men*: "That's when the woman's rung was new and only one woman wide" ("Ad Hall of Fame Future Can't Be So Skewed Toward Men," 2011). The professional structure all but ensured conflict between otherwise friendly women aiming for that one position in the hierarchy. As a key plotline of the series, the ambivalence of Joan and Peggy's relationship was intentional, which series creator Matthew Weiner emphasized in an interview: "[The writers] were joking about this, that on a normal TV show, Joan and Peggy would've been living with each other after the first episode. We've maintained this working relationship between them is somewhat contentious, because Joan knows what she's doing, has chosen a different kind of life, and Peggy has chosen her kind of life" (Sepinwall, 2010).

Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997) of the interactions between Joan and Peggy reveals a multilayered understanding of women's experiences in a segregated workforce. The method approaches discourse as a site of struggle for competing claims about the social world and privileges the standpoint of subordinate groups as it investigates the assumptions and assertions of hegemonic ideologies. Critical discourse analysis works from the perspective that power and ideology are constitutive elements of all discourse, which in turn runs through all social structures. According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), discourse "is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it" (1997, p. 258). Since ideology is embedded in the vocabularies used to make sense of the world, language can be a tool of power or resistance. Because *Mad Men* addresses a period of major social change whose place in the cultural memory is defined by the emergence of counterhegemonic discourses, the usefulness of critical discourse analysis is twofold: It provides a heuristic framework for understanding the behavior of historical actors on the cusp of a social revolution, and it helps articulate the show's position relative to gender ideology and feminism.

A central question driving the *Mad Men* narrative is whether professional success is possible for women in this environment and, if so, what they must do to achieve it. The characters of Joan and Peggy represent different responses to that question through their respective embodiments of the Cosmo Girl and liberal feminist discourses, which offered women different ways of thinking about gender, ambition, and the potential for economic advancement in the early 1960s. Fiske (2011) wrote that as a system of representation, discourse "not only makes sense of its topic area, it also constructs a sense, a social identity, of us as we speak it" (p. 15). So it is with *Mad Men's* Joan and Peggy, whose individual workplace strategies stand in for more holistic vocabularies regarding women's workplace aspirations and behavior. Their identities thus constructed in terms of discourse, the characters themselves become less salient than the dynamic between them. Indeed, every interaction between Joan and Peggy advances a larger dialogue about the most effective method for women's advancement at a New York advertising agency. Rather than allow viewers to interpret the friction between the two women as petty or typical, *Mad Men* problematizes—even politicizes—the cause for it. Viewers are invited to consider what Joan and Peggy should do in their environment. Faced with institutional discrimination and gender norms that disempower them, in what ways might they empower themselves?

Joan: Ultimate Cosmo Girl

In 1962 Helen Gurley Brown, an advertising copywriter in her 40s, published the instant bestseller *Sex and the Single Girl*. The book boldly instructed unmarried women in low-paying jobs to gain sexual experience before they got married,

make themselves attractive to rich, professional men, and make the most of their feminine assets in order to achieve financial and professional security. Because of its frank celebration of sex and deference to male approval, Brown's perspective frequently has been overlooked in histories of feminist thought. Yet, as Scanlon (2009) argued, Brown's book marked a revolutionary turn in gender discourse by promoting sex outside of marriage, encouraging women to be financially independent, and suggesting it was acceptable—even desirable—for women to seek vocational fulfillment. Brown, who had worked her way from secretary to copywriter, advocated birth control, reproductive rights, and women's liberation from the sexual double-standard that prescribed virginity for women and pleasure for men. When Brown became the editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan* in 1965, she made the magazine a go-to resource for young women interested in self-improvement. The prescriptions she advocated enforced rigid beauty standards, rampant consumerism, and male privilege—but they were not frivolous. A key element of the Cosmo Girl discourse was social mobility. According to Ouellette, this way of thinking provided “certain women, who may no longer have recognized their place in male-oriented American Dream mythology, with the discursive material to envision themselves as upwardly mobile sexual agents” (p. 225).

Mad Men develops Helen Gurley Brown's ideology—that women could use their sexuality to get ahead—by juxtaposing Joan, the agency's head secretary and office manager, with Peggy, a new hire. As Jane Marcellus describes in Chapter 2, Joan educates Peggy on how to adorn herself as a secretary and anticipate male needs, assuming Peggy's ultimate goal is to marry one of the executives. Joan could hardly be considered a romantic, however; she clearly associates marriage with economic mobility. Social status appears to be at the forefront of her mind when she asks how many trains it took Peggy to get to work (Episode 101, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”). Joan assures Peggy that if she is successful at Sterling Cooper, she will eventually live in Manhattan, home of the elite, but then reveals what she believes to be the goal of every female secretary: “Of course if you really make the right moves, you'll be out in the country and you won't be going to work at all.”

From the moment viewers meet her, Joan is working the Cosmo Girl discourse. True to its ideology, she is unequivocal: Women might be entitled to their ambition and self-determination, but the way up is through a man. As the scene continues, Peggy's furious note taking accentuates Joan's cool sophistication, revealing the power differential between them as well as their conflicting modes of knowledge. As Joan gives Peggy her next piece of *Cosmo*-like advice—to put a bag over her head and conduct an “honest” assessment of her physical attributes—Peggy earnestly interjects: “I always try to be honest.” Joan smiles slyly. “Good for you,” she says.

The series depicts white femininity not only as an obstacle to be overcome in the workplace, but also as an act to be performed and policed. Performed

well, it might contribute to professional success for individual women. Performed poorly, it provides a means for men to discipline women—and for women to discipline each other—under the guise of professionalism. Throughout the series, Joan keeps watch over herself and others, operating like a walking women's magazine as she dispenses knowledge about makeup, fashion, dating, and social etiquette. Poised, literate, beautiful, and sensual, Joan is a paragon of feminine accomplishment and also proves to be a highly skilled office manager. She engages in the very behaviors prescribed by the Cosmo Girl discourse: “self-management strategies, performative tactics, sexuality, and upwardly mobile romance,” which privilege traditional areas of feminine knowledge (Ouellette, 2010, p. 222). She shows Peggy how to charm a free lunch out of the men in the office (Episode 102, “Ladies Room,”) while she, herself, is having an affair with Roger Sterling, one of the partners (Episode 106, “Babylon”). She enjoys her independence, engages in sexual activity without guilt, and finds fulfillment in her work—indeed, she suffers psychologically when she leaves work after getting married (Episode 311, “The Gypsy and the Hobo”) and again after having a baby (Episode 501, “A Little Kiss”)—yet she maintains a steady hold on her femininity, believing it to be her chief asset in the workplace. As a character, Joan is the perfect embodiment of Helen Gurley Brown's Cosmo Girl.

Peggy: Liberal Feminist on the Make

In 1963, Betty Friedan, a labor journalist and freelance magazine writer, published a stunning cultural critique of postwar gender ideology. *The Feminine Mystique* lambasted the media, educators, and psychologists for perpetuating a myth that the rising number of women getting a college education should ultimately expect to find fulfillment as wives and mothers. Based on her experience and cultural analysis, Friedan argued that countless intelligent, ambitious women were languishing at home, failing to fulfill their potential in the public sphere. It was a message in keeping with Enlightenment ideals of individual freedom as it urged each woman to resist an oppressive dominant ideology. As Coontz wrote, “*The Feminine Mystique* contained no call for women to band together to improve their legal and political rights. Instead, it urged women, as individuals, to reject the debilitating myth that their sole purpose and happiness in life came from being a wife and mother, and to develop a life plan that would give meaning to the years after their children left home” (2011, p. 33). Because of the book's resonance with educated middle-class women, it is often credited with launching the liberal feminist movement of the '60s. Organizations such as the National Organization for Women, founded in 1966, and the Women's Equity Action League, founded in 1968, were organized to end job segregation and ensure enforcement of the Equal Pay Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Focused on women's legal rights and career opportunities, liberal feminism appealed to white middle-class

women who had access to education and the financial resources to make choices about their professional lives.

On *Mad Men*, the character of Peggy gives voice to a liberal feminist perspective as she reacts to her advertising colleagues' sexism and cynical exploitation of women's insecurities. Significantly, it is from Peggy's perspective that viewers are first introduced to Sterling Cooper when she arrives on her first day of work as Don Draper's secretary. Peggy represents a way of navigating the workplace that works in conversation with the Cosmo Girl discourse represented by Joan. A comment made early in the series by Paul Kinsey, a politically progressive copywriter, foreshadows Peggy's career arc: "You know, there are women copywriters. I mean, you always can tell when a woman's writing copy. But sometimes she just might be the right man for the job" (Episode 102, "Ladies Room"). Women could—and did—work as advertising executives in the 1960s, but they would encounter sexist assumptions, and the job would long remain coded as masculine (Giges, 2008; Worthington, 2008).

Peggy's newness leads her to problematize what others take for granted, and her questioning of office norms disrupts the environment while highlighting Joan's loyalty to a system that privileges her. When Peggy asks why men in the office are so persistent in their pursuit of sex, Joan replies in the language of naturalization, a hegemonic strategy that justifies the status quo by treating it as common sense or an unchangeable fact of reality (Fiske, 2011; Triage, 1999). Practically speaking, Joan cannot imagine any other way Peggy might succeed at Sterling Cooper, but she also has an interest in maintaining her superiority. To that end, she adds: "You're the new girl, and you're not much, so you might as well enjoy it while it lasts" (Episode 102, "Ladies Room"). The street-wise Cosmo Girl moves easily and successfully within the patriarchal culture by using her sexuality and feminine savvy, while the more idealistic novice is puzzled by behavior that seems inappropriate.

Peggy's political consciousness grows as she advances to junior copywriter at Sterling Cooper on the basis of her talent and woman's perspective, which is considered an asset when designing campaigns for feminine products. She becomes increasingly vocal in her opinions about how to advertise effectively to female consumers—for example, voicing her opposition to the idea that women should appear in ways that appeal to *men*—and chastises her colleagues for their boorish behavior (Episode 206, "Maidenform"; Episode 302, "Love Among the Ruins"). "Are you going to work or just stare at pictures of women who can't stare back?" she snaps when fellow creative team member Stan Rizzo claims to be looking for inspiration as he browses a pornographic magazine (Episode 406, "Waldorf Stories").

It is evident that Peggy's ideology does not resemble the more radical feminism of the early '70s, which would conflict with her professional orientation.

Unlike Joan, Peggy privileges industry-based, masculine-coded knowledge, which she studies in textbooks after hours (Episode 205, "The New Girl"). She wants to reform, not replace, the male-dominated, capitalistic system in which she is a participant. Yet she quietly insists on her right to a career in conversations with disapproving family members and doubtful superiors. Her experiences in the workplace lead her to make connections between the personal and the political, a foundation for women's liberation efforts later in the decade. She also begins to compare the treatment of women with that of other marginalized groups. In a conversation about the civil rights movement in the third season, Peggy draws a parallel between racial prejudice and sexism: "I have to say, most of the things Negroes can't do, I can't do, either, and nobody seems to care" (Episode 409, "The Beautiful Girls"). Her bemused male companion responds facetiously: "All right, Peggy, we'll have a civil rights march for women."

Dance of the Discourses

As Joan struggles to maintain her place in the office hierarchy, Peggy's rise as a copywriter at Sterling Cooper represents what King and DeYoung (2008) called a crisis of hegemony, the key moment when a dominant ideology is threatened by new evidence or an emerging discourse. While the Cosmo Girl discourse provides a mode of resistance to masculine hegemony, it leaves all the essential pillars of patriarchy in place. Joan is beautiful, tall, buxom, street-wise, and cool, and she knows how to please men—attributes that are highly rewarded under patriarchal standards of beauty and feminine behavior. In response to the specter of another approach, one that would downgrade her assets, Joan doubles down and advocates more strongly for appeasement of the male ego as the best means for employed women to achieve material gains.

Joan enforces the principles of status contingency, principled arbitrariness, and fealty among Sterling Cooper secretaries, described by Erika Engstrom in Chapter 1 as key elements of the secretary–boss relationship. However, Joan not only expects obedience from lower-ranking women; she also demands an endorsement of traditional gender roles. As Engstrom describes, when Peggy is wondering how to cover for Don after he has missed an appointment with his wife, Joan criticizes her for sharing his secrets and tells her she must take the blame (Episode 105, "5G"). But when Peggy reacts with disbelief that it is her job to protect men's misbehavior, Joan goes further: "That's his private life. Private. That's how these men are, and it's why we love them." The comment works to thwart any systemic critique or alteration to the gender narrative, highlighting Joan's function as hegemonic headmistress. Because hegemony requires the consent of those it subordinates, Joan positions any change in the status quo not only as unnecessary, but also as undesirable. It is not enough for women to adhere to the gendered

norms that disempower them; they must give male entitlement their enthusiastic approval.

While a liberal feminist discourse questions patriarchal standards for women's behavior, the Cosmo Girl discourse embraces these notions of hegemonic femininity. Joan carefully polices other women's gender performances, making a point to criticize Peggy's clothes, body, and demeanor. She also minimizes Peggy's status in the office with derogatory comments and allusions to her place "at the very bottom of the food chain" (Episode 102, "Ladies Room"). At an after-work party to celebrate Peggy's first taste of success as a copywriter, Joan confesses to one of the switchboard operators that she does not understand Peggy's appeal: "I'm not saying Peggy doesn't have something upstairs. I'm just saying at Sterling Cooper, things are usually happening downstairs" (Episode 108, "The Hobo Code"). Joan grows more hostile as Peggy continues to receive writing assignments, the tension building into a pivotal confrontation. Finding herself in the break room with Joan, Peggy returns a dress she had borrowed to accommodate her weight gain (viewers will later learn she was pregnant). Joan urges her to keep the dress and simply alter it to fit. "It's your dress," Peggy insists, the metaphor serving to emphasize Peggy's developing independence and rejection of Joan's approach to the workplace (Episode 109, "Shoot"). It is during this conversation that Peggy realizes her method of advancement—educating herself, working harder than the other copywriters, and fighting for a place at the men's table—is at odds with Joan's:

PEGGY: I'm not new anymore.

JOAN: Well, that's just it. Don't you want to do well here?

PEGGY: I'm the first girl to do any writing in this office since the war.

JOAN: Writing? Is that what this is about? I thought you were doing that to get close to Paul.

And later in the conversation:

JOAN: Peggy, this isn't China. There's no money in virginity.

PEGGY: I'm not a virgin.

JOAN: No. Of course not.

PEGGY: I just realized something. You think you're being helpful.

JOAN: Well, I am trying, dear. (Episode 109, "Shoot")

This simmering dialectic defines the relationship between Joan and Peggy throughout the series and finally explodes into full view during the fifth season in "The Other Woman" (Episode 511). The title of the episode is obviously a euphemism for a mistress—adultery is a major theme of this particular episode and the series, as Jane Marcellus argues in Chapter 7—but read from the perspective of Joan or Peggy, the term could also refer to the *other* ambitious woman in the

office. The episode throws their contrasting strategies into jarring relief: Peggy accepts a better position at a different ad agency, fulfilling her liberal-individualist aspirations, while Joan trades sex for an equity partnership at Sterling Cooper, achieving her objective of upward mobility after marriage fails to lift her as promised (a situation examined by Erika Engstrom in Chapter 5). Arguably *Mad Men's* most controversial episode, "The Other Woman" provides a climactic break in the narrative as Peggy moves out and Joan moves up. Viewers engaged in heated debates online about the likelihood and morality of Joan's decision (Bradley, 2012), but it is really not surprising when one considers the dialectic it serves. Joan and Peggy are simply playing out the Cosmo Girl and liberal feminist discourses to their logical conclusions, each character making a decision that serves her financial interests using the tools and strategies she perceives to be available to her.

Because of its vivid illustration of the Joan–Peggy dialectic, this episode deserves extensive discussion. Giving voice to the liberal feminist discourse, which advised women to resist the status quo as individuals, Peggy finally rejects Don's alternating treatment of her as an extension of himself (when she produces brilliant work) or an ungrateful child (when she asks for a raise). In a dramatic scene early in "The Other Woman," Don pretends Peggy's assertiveness on a campaign she helped design is indicative of her desire for a vacation rather than professional recognition. "Jesus. Peggy, you know what? You want to go to Paris? Here—go to Paris," he says, throwing a wad of cash in her face. By evoking the way a man might throw money at a stripper, Don's action is symbolic within the context of the episode. Peggy's degradation is sadly ironic, given the manner in which Joan is about to get promoted. It leads Peggy to meet first with Freddy Rumsen, who advises her to show Don she's "not some secretary from Brooklyn who's dying to help out" (as, of course, she once was), and then with Ted Chaough, the creative director at a rival agency. Polite and complimentary, Ted praises her writing ability and work ethic and offers her a job as copy chief at a higher salary. Since she has concluded there will be little chance for her to advance at Sterling Cooper as long as she is under Don's thumb, it seems logical Peggy would pursue the new opportunity. However, it is also significant that for Peggy, as for Joan, the only way forward is through a man, even a well-intentioned one, which demonstrates the inescapability of the male power structure.

The Cosmo Girl discourse offered a mode of resistance to that gendered system of authority but did nothing to dismantle it. In many ways, it was a reaction to the *Playboy* discourse of the mid-20th century, which suggested men were entitled to everything they wanted—including a submissive wife and a sexy mistress—on the basis of men's inherent subjectivity and women's inherent objectivity (Ehrenreich, 1987). If those were the rules, Helen Gurley Brown argued, then women should learn to play them to their advantage, which meant seizing control of their own sexuality. Like Peggy, Joan finds her locus of opportunity outside the agency,

but her suitor is interested in an entirely different set of assets. Herb Rennet, a key dealer of Jaguar cars, whose business Sterling Cooper is trying to earn, has told the agency's account executives he will not support their pitch unless they arrange for Joan to have sex with him. Despite her apparent misgivings—"It's prostitution," she flatly tells Pete Campbell—Joan eventually agrees to sleep with the client in exchange for a 5% equity partnership in the agency (promising a secure future for the child she is now raising alone). Dramatically, Joan's decision is revealed in a sequence of scenes that cut into Don's pitch to Jaguar, which begins with his all-male team's Rat Pack-style entrance into a large showroom. Sterling Cooper has designed a campaign that would position the luxury car as a temperamental mistress, exciting but unreliable. The concept draws on a longstanding trope in advertising that conflates cars and women, appealing to male entitlement with the tagline: "Jaguar. At last. Something beautiful you can truly own." Playing to the men in the room, Don waxes eloquent on the nature of desire and asks those assembled for the pitch: "Oh, this car. This thing, gentlemen. What price would we pay? What behavior would we forgive?" Don's speech, which narrates the scenes of Joan's visit with the client, seems to make a connection between the pubescent sex drive he is describing and the male fantasy being fulfilled in the hotel room. However, rather than interpret Don's words as a reference to Joan's objectification—positing her as a beautiful "thing" the agency has put up for sale—the Cosmo Girl discourse reminds us to place her in the subject position. What price is *Joan* willing to pay? What behavior is *she* willing to forgive? After all, Joan is the only character to emerge from this episode with something permanent: an owner's stake in the agency. The others, including Herb, have only rented.

The episode concludes with Peggy's quiet exit from the agency, Joan glancing coolly at "the other woman," who has chosen to leave rather than have money hurled at her body. Yet as the season nears its end, viewers are treated to a poignant image of the five partners, shot from behind and framed by gleaming, expansive windows as they preview a bigger office space (Episode 513, "The Phantom"). Wearing red, Joan is standing directly at the center of this lineup. With two dark-suited men on either side, she is positioned quite literally at the center of power, a striking visual that seems to eliminate ambiguity about her new status. The question for viewers has now shifted: Will the tradeoff be worth it, given the contempt that gets heaped upon women who wield sexuality to their advantage? Has Joan really turned the tables on the system?

The Limits of Individual Empowerment

Beyond giving voice to the liberal feminist and Cosmo Girl discourses, *Mad Men* remains true to its project of cultural critique by also illustrating the limits of each discourse, creating the mounting tension that lays the groundwork for a historical understanding of second-wave feminist discourse. For even as Joan and Peggy

begin to see rewards from their respective ambitions—rewards that align with the discourses each represents—they must endure the twisted discipline patriarchy reserves for upwardly mobile women. One of the most memorable turns of the series arrives during the second season, when Joan's achievement of the Cosmo Girl's ultimate goal, engagement to a high-status man, is announced on the same day Peggy finally gets her own office (Episode 212, "The Mountain King"). At first it might appear as if both women have achieved a desirable outcome, but viewers are soon left with no doubt as to which one has the better deal. For at the very moment Peggy is savoring her new sovereign space and hard-won recognition, Joan is sexually assaulted by her fiancé, Greg Harris, on the floor of Don Draper's office. The act, which Erika Engstrom analyzes through a different lens in Chapter 5, is loaded with symbolism. First, it demonstrates Greg's hostility—and probably his jealousy, since he turns out to be incompetent at his own work—toward Joan's professionalism and sexual experience. Second, it speaks to his particular understanding of sexual politics. Evincing a tribal view of Sterling Cooper, Greg seems to be asserting his manhood by staking his claim on Joan in rival territory. But regardless of his motivation, it is Joan's response viewers are invited to consider as she brushes off the assault and proceeds with the nuptials. Given her transactional view of sex, it is likely she considers the violence an ugly price to pay for entrée to a higher socioeconomic class. But her stubborn stoicism also lends poignancy to a comment she has made upon the event of Peggy's promotion: "I said congratulations, didn't I? Although sometimes when people get what they want, they realize how limited their goals were" (Episode 113, "The Wheel").

Despite the ideological resistance offered by the Cosmo Girl discourse, which sought to elevate women within a sexist system, Joan's strategy ultimately does not reward her in a manner commensurate with her intelligence, knowledge, and social facility. Throughout the series, her coworkers grant her a certain amount of power—allowing her to make personnel decisions and balance the books—but they never grant her authority. Clearly more socially and professionally competent than her husband, Joan begins to recognize the fulfillment she gets from her work and returns to Sterling Cooper when her marriage becomes a burden (Episode 313, "Shut the Door. Have a Seat"). After Joan learns Greg has volunteered for a second tour in Vietnam, abandoning her and the baby, she seethes: "You never were [a good man], even before we were married." It is the only allusion Joan ever makes to Greg's rape of her (Episode 504, "Mystery Date"). She is later served with divorce papers in the lobby of her office, a public humiliation that exposes her failure on two measures: finding love and achieving financial security (Episode 510, "Christmas Waltz"). Such is the risk of a strategy that leaves men at the fulcrum of women's economic goals, the narrative reminds viewers.

A failed marriage is hardly the only mortification Joan will suffer as the quintessential Cosmo Girl. Male colleagues continually demean her, giving voice to

another important critique of the discourse: the physical and professional danger women face when they employ their sexuality in the office. It becomes clear to viewers that while Joan might possess a withering tongue and a formidable sensuality, any feminine performance predicated on the heterosexual desires of *some* men has the result of positioning *all* men as the ultimate arbiters of a woman's worth. Early in the series, we are made aware of the gap between Joan's perceived status and the status she is granted by others. When Paul Kinsey introduces her to his new girlfriend as the senior secretary, Joan interrupts to clarify: "Office manager" (Episode 202, "Flight 1"). And when she succeeds brilliantly in a rare chance at more creative work—reading scripts for the television department—she is caught off-guard when the job is handed to a younger, inexperienced man whom she must train (Episode 208, "A Night to Remember"). Despite Joan's intelligence and management skills, men cannot—or, probably more accurately, *will* not—think of her as anything more than a low-status secretary and an object of sexual desire. As Jane Marcellus points out in Chapter 2, even after Joan is made a partner and shows every intention of fully exercising that role, others in the office cannot forget how she obtained it. The head of the television department, Harry Crane, overrules one of Joan's personnel decisions and bitterly declares that he deserves a partnership, especially given the way Joan earned hers (Episode 604, "To Have and To Hold"). Peggy, also, reminds Joan they have arrived at their achievements in very different ways in a conversation that calls explicit attention to the conflict between their perspectives:

PEGGY: Are you trying to intimidate me?

JOAN: No, that's always been impossible because that would require respect for me and what I do.

PEGGY: I know you want this. And now you can't have it. You could have, but now you can't.

JOAN: It's mine. And I've been doing account work in one form or another since the day I started.

PEGGY: You are not in that department.

JOAN: I never said that to you when you stopped filing and started writing copy.

PEGGY: Yes, you did. Every day. And it was worse because you made me feel like I couldn't do it. I know you can do this.

JOAN: So why do you think I should give it away?

PEGGY: I worked my way up.

JOAN: You were so brave, letting Don carry you to the deep end.

PEGGY: I never slept with him.

JOAN: Congratulations. You really are just like them.

PEGGY: I'm sorry. But I never thought I would be in the position to say, 'Joan, you've made a mistake.'

JOAN: I have to do it myself, Peggy. This is the only way I could do it.
(Episode 610, "A Tale of Two Cities")

The dialectic between Joan and Peggy implies that liberal feminism offers women a better route to self-fulfillment and social mobility; however, as the previous dialogue demonstrates, the series pokes at the weaknesses of that discourse, also. For one thing, Peggy is forced to adopt Cosmo Girl tactics in order to advance her career. In season two, when the agency is working on a campaign for Maidenform, Peggy finds herself out of the loop and appeals to Joan for help:

JOAN: I've never had your job. I've never wanted it. You're in their country. Learn to speak the language.

PEGGY: You don't talk that way.

JOAN: I don't need to. And honestly, you never listen to a word I've said. You want to be taken seriously? Stop dressing like a little girl. (Episode 206, "Maidenform")

Not only is Joan reasserting a gendered separation of spheres, but she is also instructing Peggy on the performance of femininity. It was a point Peggy already had heard from Bobbie Barrett, a shrewd and wealthy businesswoman involved with Don, who advised her: "No one will tell you this, but you can't be a man. So don't try. Be a woman" (Episode 205, "The New Girl"). Peggy struggles to dress and behave in a manner that conforms to gendered expectations, but her career soars once she gets a makeover and adopts a more sophisticated feminine persona. She also scores small personal victories, such as successfully using one of Joan's lines to attract a man at a bar (Episode 302, "Love Among the Ruins") and using Joan's feedback to rewrite a personal ad that will land her a roommate (Episode 304, "The Arrangements"). Thus, Peggy's narrative arc endorses the vision of the liberal feminist discourse but leaves the effectiveness of its methods open to inquiry. Before Joan leaves to get married in season three, Peggy simultaneously tries to connect with Joan and assert her independence. Joan reminds her, however, that she has not been entirely free of the Cosmo Girl influence:

PEGGY: I don't want you to think I never listen to you. It's just, we can't all be you.

JOAN: Be that as it may, I do take some credit for your success here.

PEGGY: I'm really happy that you got what you wanted. I remember on my first day you said that could happen to me if I played my cards right. (Episode 306, "Guy Walks Into an Advertising Agency")

By distancing herself from Joan and other women in the office, Peggy is choosing to see herself the way others see her: as an exception. She is neither one of the girls nor one of the boys; she identifies with the work, privileging her pro-

fessional knowledge over Joan's more traditional feminine knowledge. Because of this orientation, Peggy fails to recognize the common experiences she shares with other women and is somewhat oblivious to how they might perceive her. At an office party, for example, she moves to the front of the food line with the male executives and begins eating while the secretaries wait, resentfully watching her take advantage of a custom that treats most women like second-class citizens (Episode 204, "Three Sundays"). She also takes up Joan's task of policing other women, rebuking Don's new secretary for not covering his absences well enough—the very type of infraction she had once questioned when it was leveled against her: "I want you to imagine, when you talk about Mr. Draper, that he's standing right behind you" (Episode 201, "For Those Who Think Young"). As Peggy achieves greater success, she puts more space between herself and her secretarial sisters, differentiating herself socially and psychologically. This hierarchical behavior, which Joan had warned her to avoid (Episode 113, "The Wheel"), exposes a key bias in the liberal feminist discourse: the upholding of class distinctions and a failure to perceive the intersections between class and gender. Once, when Peggy is high from smoking marijuana with a male colleague, she responds to the disapproval of her secretary with a mix of epiphany and condescension: "The thing is, I have a job. I have my own office with my name on the door, and I have a secretary. That's you. And I am not scared of any of this. But you're scared. Oh, my God, you're scared. Don't worry about me. I am going to get to do everything you want for me" (Episode 303, "My Old Kentucky Home").

Working effectively with lower-ranking employees will prove to be a challenge for Peggy, who learned at the feet of Don Draper and perpetuates some of his disregard and biting contempt for junior colleagues and staff members. For instance, while Peggy is still at Sterling Cooper, she finds herself comforting Don's latest secretary, Allison, who is upset after having a sexual encounter with him. Confronted with Allison's assumption that she and Don also have been intimate, Peggy coldly disengages and withholds any empathy she otherwise might feel, telling Allison: "Your problem is not my problem. . . . And, honestly, you should get over it" (Episode 404, "The Rejected"). As Peggy pulls away, she aligns herself with a higher class of employee, ignoring the common structural or interpersonal issues women share because of their gender.

This lack of awareness follows Peggy to her new job at Cutler, Gleason, and Chaough, where both her boss, Ted Chaough, and her boyfriend, Abe Drexler, gently suggest she should be more considerate of her staff (Episode 602, "The Doorway, Part 2"). Peggy has adopted a masculine-coded model of management: transactional, which focuses on the completion of tasks within an organization's rules and hierarchy, rather than transformational, which builds interpersonal relationships and seeks organizational change when necessary (see, for example, Maher, 1997). Peggy's leadership style is perhaps a logical result of starting her

career as Don's protégé but leaves her open to being perceived as an "iron maiden," a workplace stereotype described by Erika Engstrom in Chapter 1. Indeed, as Engstrom recounts, Peggy soon finds a bottle of feminine hygiene powder on her desk. Ted brushes it off as a gag gift, but it is clearly the lower-ranking men's way of disciplining her for not conforming to their gendered expectations (Episode 603, "Collaborators"). Peggy's interpersonal awkwardness makes her a sympathetic character, especially when she is being punished for it, but it also invites viewers to question the way she conducts herself. Further, it sets her apart from other women, accentuating her induction into a male professional culture. By leading viewers to understand Peggy's predicament—the conflict between performing gender and performing professionalism in a sexist workplace—the series demonstrates the limits and costs of individual achievement.

The elitism of the liberal feminist discourse is given extensive treatment in the fourth season in an earlier episode that is primarily about sexual harassment in the workplace. Titled "The Summer Man," the episode is another chapter central to the Joan–Peggy dialectic and deserves rich description (Episode 408). It begins as several men struggle with a vending machine that is not working properly. Peggy and another woman are finding humor in the spectacle as the men make a show of physically wrestling with the machine. When Joan instructs everyone to get back to work, Joey Baird, a freelance artist, mocks her to a colleague: "Joan was just handing out demerits." Joan calls him into her office for a private conversation, and he responds with another sneering joke: "Private spanking, just like my dream." With these comments, Joey has shoved Joan into what Jhally (2007) calls the "dreamworld" of heterosexual male fantasy, forcing her to play the sexualized teacher in his imaginary game. Once in her office, he responds with even more hostility: "What do you do around here besides walking around like you're trying to get raped? . . . I'm not some young girl off the bus. I don't need some madam from a Shanghai whorehouse to show me the ropes." Invoking both sexual violence and prostitution, Joey debases Joan's authority, refusing to grant her the higher status of a salaried employee. He continues the assault later in a conversation with Peggy: "There's a Joan in every company. My mother was a Joan. Always telling everybody what to do. She even wore a pen around her neck so people would stare at her tits."

The abuse Joan endures for her claims to authority in the office amount to a sexualized defrocking—nearly always from men of a lower rank. Yet she has a strategy for "talking back" to sexual harassment, and it is deliberately verbal rather than institutional. After Joey has posted a cartoon depicting Joan performing oral sex on Lane Pryce, she marches into the break room and unleashes her venom on the men gathered there: "I can't wait until next year when all of you are in Vietnam. You will be pining for the day when someone was trying to make your life easier. When you're over there, and you're in the jungle, and they're shooting

at you, remember you're not dying for me because I never liked you." With this withering monologue, she has answered their attacks with her own gendered ammunition, reminding them of the physical risk posed by virile manhood in the '60s. If women could be raped, men could be conscripted and sent to die in somebody else's war. Further, she has removed herself—and the white womanhood she represents—as their reason for fighting, illustrating the futility of the conflict and removing the tragic narrative they might tell themselves about women at home mourning their fate. Underscoring the power of this invective, one of the men remarks: "Jesus. Scorched earth."

Beyond its exploration of sexual politics, the episode is compelling for its examination of the necessarily complex relationship between women in a patriarchal workplace. Predictably, Peggy's response to Joey's sexual harassment hinges on her attachment to the existing hierarchy. First, she appeals to a higher authority, asking Don to reprimand Joey. When Don instructs her to earn respect for herself, Peggy confronts Joey and ultimately fires him, taking satisfaction in punishing his sexism with her institutional power. Viewers might have cheered Peggy's assertiveness, but a conversation with Joan at the end of the day illustrates Peggy's transactional blind spot and, consequently, a major bias of the liberal feminist discourse:

PEGGY: I don't know if you heard, but I fired Joey.

JOAN: I did. Good for you.

PEGGY: Excuse me?

JOAN: Now everybody in the office will know that you solved my problem and that you must be really important, I guess.

PEGGY: What's wrong with you? I defended you.

JOAN: You defended yourself.

PEGGY: Fine. That cartoon was disgusting.

JOAN: I'd already handled it. And if I wanted to go further, one dinner with Mr. Courtsruff from Sugarbury Ham and Joey would've been off it and out of my hair.

PEGGY: So it's the same result.

JOAN: You want to be a big shot. Well, no matter how powerful we get around here, they can still just draw a cartoon. So all you've done is prove to them that I'm a meaningless secretary and you're another humorless bitch. Have a nice weekend. Good night, Peggy. (Episode 408, "The Summer Man")

This encounter highlights the difference between Joan's feminine-coded approach to the workplace, which uses relational knowledge, and Peggy's masculine-coded approach, which leans on the hierarchical gears of an institution. However, the episode also speaks to a major critique made of liberal feminism—its focus on the experiences of professional white women to the exclusion of working-class women

and women of color (Collins, 1989; hooks, 2000). The presumption that women formed a unified class that faced a core and common oppression would be discredited by the voices and experiences of women who were differently oppressed by race, ethnicity, sexual identity, and socioeconomic class (Lourde, 1984). Further, any ideology that addressed women's issues from the top down—as Peggy has done here—by its nature empowered some individual women at the expense of others. This episode of *Mad Men*, perhaps more than any other, leaves viewers to wonder whether sisterhood among employed women is possible within this historical context and, if not, what must change.

A Third Way

There are glimpses throughout the series of a possible alliance between Joan and Peggy, such as their commiseration over Don's engagement to Megan (Episode 413, "Tomorrowland"). When Don makes the surprise announcement, Joan has recently been promoted to director of accounts (but will not receive a pay raise) while Peggy has brought in the agency's first new account in months (an accomplishment eclipsed by the fanfare over Don and Megan). When Joan comments that she will be relieved to leave behind the agency and its drama in order to be a homemaker, Peggy retorts, "Bullshit!"—which makes them both laugh in acknowledgment of Joan's workplace ambition. Indeed, after her divorce, Joan eventually makes a play for her own account at the merged agency of Sterling Cooper. As Jane Marcellus describes in Chapter 2, Joan has taken the lead to Ted Chaough, who simply hands the account—and a new title—to Pete Campbell. Unwilling to be passed over yet again, Joan flouts Ted's instruction and takes Pete's place at a surreptitious meeting she arranges with Peggy and the client. In a reversal of roles, this time it is Peggy who endorses Joan's vision but disapproves of her method. Ultimately, however, Peggy helps mitigate the fallout, demonstrating the power of sisterhood.

This final exchange of the dialectic, which occurs at the end of *Mad Men*'s sixth season, continues to suggest that each set of prescriptions for women's professional empowerment is inadequate on its own. Liberal feminism leaves the structure of the workplace intact, including class distinctions and professional hierarchies, while the Cosmo Girl discourse remains problematically rooted in male chauvinism. Exacerbating the tension, liberal feminism emphasizes sex equality while the Cosmo Girl discourse emphasizes sex difference. What would happen, viewers might wonder, if Joan and Peggy formed their own agency? By the end of its penultimate season, the series had yet to portray a unified space where a feminine culture could develop independently of men, but the narrative has made the scenario imaginable. By denying viewers the satisfaction of an uncomplicated resolution to working women's predicament in the '60s, the series establishes the

need for a third discourse—a new framework for understanding and synthesizing competing notions of women's empowerment.

Articulated by Millett (2000), the second-wave feminist discourse takes the position that all institutions developed under patriarchy—including most workplaces and families—are inherently problematic. Millett developed the argument that sexism could be found at the root of all systems of oppression, especially those relating to socioeconomic class, as she deconstructed widely embraced scientific and literary discourses that naturalized misogyny in the public sphere and in the home. Cultural expression provided the historical and rhetorical foundation for the material inequities women suffered in the 20th century, she argued, citing observations and analyses directly applicable to *Mad Men's* fictional ad agency. For example, Millett criticizes men's feelings of superiority, self-worship, and entitlement—a set of characteristics that aptly describes the male executives of Sterling Cooper. In addition, her historical treatment of marriage as a form of feudalism helps to clarify the characters' careless attitude toward their families, which—contrary to most popular depictions of this period—*Mad Men* portrays as a source of dysfunction rather than security. Finally, Millett gives some discussion to women's options for self-empowerment within a sexist culture, effectively explaining the actions of Joan and Peggy.

Without labeling it as such, Millett explicates the Cosmo Girl discourse by articulating the dilemma working-class women face as they struggle to make their way in a capitalistic society that would gladly exploit their bodies. Rather than treat prostitution as deviant, Millett presents the realities that make it a reasonable option and links it to the model of heterosexual marriage, which historically has granted men a certain amount of sexual access to their wives in exchange for meeting the women's material needs. Millett also notes the double standard that relentlessly sexualizes women but punishes women who take any pleasure from their sexuality:

There is a sense in which the prostitute's role is an exaggeration of patriarchal economic conditions where the majority of females are driven to live through some exchange of sexuality for support. The degradation in which the prostitute is held and holds herself, the punitive attitude society adopts toward her, are but reflections of a culture whose general attitudes toward sexuality are negative and which attaches great penalties to a promiscuity in women it does not think to punish in men. (p. 123)

Describing the rise of literary feminism in the 19th century, Millett also elaborates on the position of women who might be intelligent but are not endowed with the kind of beauty that would attract a man of means. Reviewing Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, Millett describes a Peggy-like heroine in Lucy Snowe, who chafes under the constraints of her time and vacillates between fantasies of vocational accomplishment and romantic surrender. Lucy is eventually set free by the education she receives while trying to prove her worth to a misogynistic male who

tutors her—a dynamic eerily reminiscent of the relationship between Peggy and Don:

Despite the impossible atmosphere he gives off as a pedagogue, the bullying, the captivity in overheated rooms, the endless spying, the bowdlerizing of her texts—she learns. It is his ridicule that forces her to achieve, pokes her into development, deprives her of the somnolence of ladyhood, its small ambitions, timidity, and self-doubt. (p. 141)

Like Millett's devastating cultural critique, *Mad Men* invites viewers to see the white social structure of midcentury America as a beautiful, arbitrary façade, a theme emphasized by the show's gorgeous aesthetics and, not incidentally, the false identity of its main protagonist. Upward mobility is presented as the overriding goal of nearly all the employees at Sterling Cooper, and gender performance—including rampant sexism—is presented as a defining aspect of each character's identity. By interweaving the Cosmo Girl and liberal feminist discourses as possible responses within this environment, the series legitimates a feminist perspective and expands the televisual representation of gender-based ideology. Further, by critiquing each discourse, the series ultimately points viewers toward an understanding of second-wave feminism, which encouraged the creation of new cooperative spaces that valued women's voices. It would be natural for viewers to wonder when Peggy and Joan will conduct the "honest" assessment of their situation that Joan recommended in the pilot episode. It would also be reasonable for viewers to wish Joan and Peggy would start their own agency, using a different style of management, rather than try to win at a game that is stacked against them. Indeed, as the sixth season concludes, Peggy is in a pantsuit, sitting behind Don's desk.

Series creator Matthew Weiner has discouraged speculation that Peggy will strike out on her own, telling an interviewer: "The women's movement didn't really even have any traction until the '70s, and Peggy is still an exceptional person with an unusual job and unusually successful for where she is." Nevertheless, the series creates a discursive space for second-wave feminism, positioning it as a possible—and rational—response to patriarchy. By breathing life into primary historical discourses, *Mad Men* illuminates the conditions and choices faced by employed white women in the 1960s. In doing so, the series complicates viewers' understanding of professional women's relationships and lays a discursive foundation for the social revolution to come.